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ABSTRACT

Current uses of standardized English tests are adversely affecting students, misleading lay people, and having a pernicious effect on the English profession. These tests are severely limited, incapable of assessing speaking skill and effectiveness, reading interests, appreciation of literature, listening skill, understanding and appreciation of nonprint media, or the development of values through literature. The public needs to be made aware of these truths: standardized norm-referenced tests may have little or nothing to do with the content and quality of the English language arts program in a particular school; testing and evaluation or assessment are not synonymous; ability to read and commitment to reading are not the same; eighth grade reading ability is a construct, not a reality; the teaching of reading, writing, speaking, and listening is a responsibility to be shared by all teachers and by parents; tests which are not diagnostic are educational dead ends; schools and teachers are not responsibile for social conditions that militate against learning; and high performance on a test is no guarantee of recititude. Tests too often divert us from asking the truly significant questions. (JM)

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THE VISE/VICE OF STANDARDIZED TESTING: NATIONAL DEPRECIATION BY QUANTIFICATION

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In the past five years, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has raised serious questions about the effects that mandatory uses of standardized tests are having upon students and teachers, and upon the profession of English. Unlike the National Education Association, NCTE has not called for a national moratorium on standardized testing, nor has it suggested a cessation of obligatory IQ testing, as have Benjamin Fine, former education editor for the New York Times, and Paul Houts, editor of The National Elementary Principal. But through a variety of resolutions and publications--among the latter, Uses, Abuses, Misuses of Standardized Tests in English (NCTE, 1974), Common Sense and Testing in English (NCTE, 1975), and Reviews of Selected Published Tests in English (NCTE, 1976)--and through the endorsement of the statement on standardized achievement tests drafted at a conference on testing sponsored in 1975 by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation, the Council has attempted to make clear to its membership and to the public its belief that present uses of standardized tests are adversely affecting students, misleading lay people, and having a pernicious effect upon the English profession.

I do not believe I need review, except in the most cursory way, complaints that standardized tests have too often been used to label students unjustly; to track them; to admit them to, or reject them from, classes, programs, or schools; to deny them the full play of their individuality and, thereby, to deny to the society the full richness of its pluralism. In light of the cultural mosaic that is America, it is nonsense to talk about national norms against which the achievements of an individual or a group can be accurately compared. There exist only test publishers' norms, and the sample populations

selected to norm tests are not always representative in time or place or race of the communities of students who take the tests. As the authors of Common Sense and Testing in English note, "Many English tests have content totally alien to large groups of young people, such as reading passages about life in a Maine fishing town or about a world of butlers and house maids on a test used in a big southwestern city with a large Latino and black student body."

Items that are culturally biased against a population different from the norming population lead to the legitimate protests of those discriminated against; items that are obsolete pose a different order of problem, for neither students nor teachers may realize that knowledge of archaic information or command of misinformation is being assessed. For years after zip codes were added to letters, students were expected on one widely used test to punctuate postal zones by setting them off with commas. Tests of usage often require students to "correct" word choices once viewed as unacceptable but now regarded as acceptable by linguists and lexicographers.

Even when the items they contain are unassailable, standardized norm-referenced tests are reactionary instruments, for the processes of their norming and validation require that they contain well-established information, information that is, if not common coin of the realm, currency widely shared. Perforce, standardized tests can never be on the cutting edge of knowledge, that edge where intuitive hunches, sudden insights, creative leaps, and serendipitious luck make the unperceived perceptible, the unknown, known. Of concern to all scholars today is the rapidity with which knowledge in their fields accumulates and changes. One consequence of rapidly altering knowledge is that test makers must either gamble with information that is new and seemingly important but that may soon obsolesce, or else play safe

with information that may be trivial but enduring. The latter is the sensible course for those who want to stay in business, but it is a course detrimental to education and to the intellectual quality of society.

The current back-to-basics movement exposes the triviality of most citizens' knowledge of English, a subject that includes not just functional reading but the grandeur that is literature--fairy tales, folklore, poems, plays, novels, essays, and short stories of all places and times; a subject that examines not just usage or spelling but language, that most human of subjects, in all its myriad dimensions and branches--philology, linguistics, semantics, stylistics, lexicography, phonology; a subject that analyzes not just rules of punctuation but the act of written composition--its various processes and its forms, including the subtle ways in which audience and occasion determine an author's rhetorical strategies; a subject that also includes many of the important skills associated with speaking effectively and listening critically; finally, a subject that, of late, has begun to include analysis and appreciation of nonprint media.

If the public views English narrowly as a service subject for the teaching of 8th grade literacy--whatever that means--and for improving the nation's morals through teaching the young to be better spellers and punctuators, then test makers must take major responsibility for what has become a squint-eyed definition of a subject that its teachers believe to be noble, complex, and variegated. Most citizens do not know what you and I know: that quite limited areas of English are being tested today by norm-referenced standardized tests, only those areas that best lend themselves to quantifiable computerized scoring. The tests do not assess speaking skill and effectiveness, reading interests, appreciation of literature, listening skill, understanding and appreciation of nonprint media, or development of personal values through the study of literature. Nor do many of them assess written composition. At

present, for example, the College Entrance Examination Board sponsors in both the Admissions Testing Program and the College Level Examination Program tests of written composition that do not require students to write. If test publishers wish the support of teachers and professional subject matter organizations, they are going to have to do a much better job than they have done to date of educating the public, including legislators and members of school boards, to the limitations of any testing program. Pointing to descriptions in a test booklet of norming and validation procedures and to caveats to test interpreters that the test has a limited province will no longer do. What is now needed is a well-financed campaign through newspapers and journal articles, workshops, and institutes to educate the public to these elementary truths:

1. Testing and evaluation or assessment are not synomous. Testing is to evaluation as (a) a sliver is to a board; (b) a map is to a state; (c) a raindrop is to a shower; (d) a number is to a human being. Choose one.
2. Standardized norm-referenced tests may have little or nothing to do with the content and quality of the English language arts program in a particular school. The more innovative the program or the more deviant the student population from norming populations, the less likelihood that the quality of the program is inferable from test scores.
3. Ability to read and commitment to reading are not the same. Millions of people in this nation who know how to read choose not to do so. Studies by the Roper Organization of what people think of television and other media reveal that the public has become increasingly dependent on television as its prime source of information. When

asked, "If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, the magazines and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe--the one on radio, or television, or magazines, or newspapers?" 51 percent of those polled by the Roper Organization in 1974 said they would find television most believable, an increase of 22 percentage points since the first poll in 1959. Only 20 percent of the respondents found newspapers to be most believable, while radio and magazines trailed, each supported by 8 percent of those polled. When asked, "Suppose you could continue to have one of the following: radio, television, newspapers, or magazines--which one of the four would you most want to keep?" 59 percent of those polled opted for television, while 19 percent chose newspapers; 17 percent, radio; and 4 percent, magazines.

In short, ability to pass a proficiency test in reading does not a reader make.

4. Eighth-grade reading ability is a construct, not a reality. My ideational 8th grade is populated with budding Shakespeares, Tolstoys, Ellisons and Ibsens. Vonnegut is my reluctant learner. How does your class shape up by comparison?

5. The teaching of reading, writing, speaking, and listening is a responsibility to be shared by all teachers and by parents. Teachers of English should not be singled out and scapegoated for an alleged decline in students' verbal skills. Those skills need to be taught in relationship to each subject area, for each has its own vocabulary and its own modes of discourse. Too, parents who themselves do not

read or write can scarcely fault the schools for not making prodigious readers and inveterate writers of their progeny. It's a rare child today who observes a parent write anything beyond a shopping list or a note on a Christmas card.

6. Tests which are not diagnostic are educational dead ends. To report that a child reads at a 6.3 grade level does nothing for the child and provides the teacher, the parents, and the public with almost no information. The score fails both to reveal the child's strengths and weaknesses in reading different types of materials--mathematics, social science, science, literature, etc.--and to suggest what kind of remedial work, if any, is advisable. Nor does the bald score disclose anything about the test itself--its length, its composition, its reliability, its validity, or the conditions under which it was administered.

7. Schools and teachers are not responsible for social conditions that militate against learning. Literacy is related to parental education and income, both of which are in this country unfortunately related to race. In Literacy Among Youths 12-17 Years Old, a study conducted from 1966 to 1970 and published by the Government Printing Office in 1973, evidence clearly supports the thesis that illiterates in this society come mainly from homes in which the parents are not well educated and are members of minority groups. For the study, literacy was determined by youths' performance on The Brief Test of Literacy, specially constructed and pretested by Thomas F. Donlan and W. Miles McPeek of the Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J. The test makers defined literacy as "that level of achievement which is attained by the average child in the United States by the beginning of the fourth grade."

Among the sample population of 6,700 youths twelve to seventeen years of age, illiteracy was found to be most prevalent among boys, especially blacks, from low-income families whose parents have little or no formal education. The survey found that 4.7 percent of white males and 1.7 percent of white females could not read at the fourth-grade level, compared with 20.5 percent black males and 9.6 percent of black females. Youths whose parents had no formal education had an illiteracy rate of 27.4 percent, much higher than the 8.9 percent for those whose parents had at least elementary school training. In families with less than $3,000 annual income, 9.8 percent of white youths and 22.1 percent of blacks were judged illiterate, i.e., incapable of reading fourth-grade materials. However, illiteracy dropped to 3.5 percent and 12.6 percent respectively for children whose families earned $5,000 to $7,000 annually, and to 0.8 percent and 4.7 percent for children whose families earned more than $10,000 per year.

Robert Thorndike in Reading Comprehension Education in Fifteen Countries, the report of a study conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and published in 1973 by John Wiley and Sons, also found reading comprehension to be directly related to students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Mr. Thorndike writes in his summary of findings:

> A second main finding is that in the developed countries an appreciable prediction of the reading achievement of individual students--and an even more substantial prediction of the average reading achievement of children in a school--is provided by information about their home and family backgrounds. A dominant determiner of the outcome from a school in terms of reading

performance is the input in terms of the kinds of students that go to the school. When the population of a school comes from homes in which the parents are themselves well educated, economically advantaged, and able to provide an environment in which reading materials and communications media are available, the school shows a generally superior level of reading achievement. The implication is that if the society wishes to increase literacy dramatically, it needs to provide students with well educated, reasonably affluent parents, an implication that Christopher Jencks would appreciate.

8. High performance on a test is no guarantee of rectitude. Those implicated in Watergate were graduates of prestigious colleges and universities, many of them were lawyers, all of them used Standard English--or bureaucratic variants thereof--and all of them would have performed well on standardized norm-referenced tests of reading proficiency. But they were also liars and cheats who undermined the Bill of Rights and came close to destroying our system of constitutional checks and balances.

I cannot help feeling that the current emphasis on testing and accountability is wrong, not just because it leaves to computers rather than to teachers determination of what is to be emphasized in the curriculum--we test what can be expediently scored, not necessarily what is important--but because the tests too often divert us from asking truly significant questions.

Let me present a medley: What, for our times, is a good act? What is a good person? Are there good people any more? If not, why not? If so, who are they, and what might we learn from them? Why has faith been lost in our present social and political institutions? Can faith be restored? Should it be? What options do we have left so far as possible national futures are concerned? In

view of those options, what type of society do we want thirty, forty, a hundred years from now? What kinds of citizens do we want inhabiting that society? What will they need to know and be able to do? What feelings or attitudes should they hold toward others who will share the planet? What can the schools do now to help students anticipate and control change during their lifetimes?

I leave you with some figures on functional literacy and on the humanities. Of the 1,558 adults who participated last year in the Seventh Annual Gallop Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education, 96 percent thought it "very important" that students be able to read well enough to follow an instruction manual; 92 percent thought it "very important" that students be able to write a letter of application using correct grammar and correct spelling; but only 33 percent thought it "very important" that students know something about the history of mankind and the great leaders in art and literature.

I hope those figures concern you as much as they do me for what they portend about educational priorities and the future of the nation.